

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 825

HE 011 192

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TITLE History of Ideas at Baker University. Position Paper II. Purpose and Content.
PUB DATE Mar 77
NOTE 11p.; For related documents see HE 011 191-193
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Development; *Educational Objectives; Educational Philosophy; *Ethical Instruction; *General Education; Higher Education; Humanities; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Moral Development; Peace; *Social History; *Values; Western Civilization
IDENTIFIERS Baker University KS

ABSTRACT

The goals and content of an interdisciplinary course on the history of ideas, which is required at Baker University as part of its general education program, are described in this position paper. The course aims to help students appreciate the complex character of historical reality and to help them clarify their values and make responsible moral judgments. In order to meet those objectives, alternative ways in which Westerners have understood the ideas of life, peace, and freedom are examined. These ideas concerning values are studied in the context of great cities that have been important centers of Western civilization. The content of the course and procedural matters are discussed. (Author/LBH)

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Ref. No. PNP 77:2
March, 1977

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History of Ideas at Baker University
Position Paper II. Purpose and Content
by John C. English

The present paper is the second in a series of five concerning the history of ideas course which Baker will begin to offer in the fall of 1977. In the first paper, some basic terms were defined and certain presuppositions were specified. In this paper, we will build upon these foundations. The particular course which Baker will teach, a course consistent with the foregoing presuppositions, will be outlined. In a future paper, details of lecture topics and reading assignments will be given.

This paper is divided into three sections, to wit:

- I. Statement of purpose;
- II. Content of the course; and
- III. Procedural matters.

I. Purpose of the Course

The purpose of this history of ideas course, as I conceive it, can be stated in terms of two propositions:

- A. To help students become aware of the "texture" of history; and
- B. To help students clarify their values and to make responsible moral judgments.

Commentary upon each of these propositions follows.

A. To help students become aware of the "texture" of history. The word "history," as used in my first proposition, refers to events which have occurred in the past, not to the accounts of those events which historians have written for us. In my first paper, I tried to show that history has a certain "texture;" that is to say, it is composed of an intricate web of continually changing interrelationships, in which the natural environment, the institutions of society and individual persons each have their parts. My first purpose is to help students develop a "feel" for the complex character of this historical reality. Such a sensitivity is important for two reasons.

1. If one develops such a sense, he is ready to explain why particular ideas have appeared in history and how these ideas have affected the course of

¹References to the first paper in this series take the following form, in which the last number is the page number: PNP 77:1/14.

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events.² If we like, we can say that the relationship between an individual's ideas and the surroundings in which he finds himself is dialectical in character. On the one hand, the ideas of a given individual reflect some degree at least,³ the conditions which prevail in his particular time and place. On the other hand, the individual who acts upon his ideas may modify the conditions so obtaining.

2. The explanation of historical reality, however partial, prepares the way for the next step. The history of ideas is a humanities course, which means that it is primarily concerned with values.⁴ Men and women do not make moral decisions in a vacuum. They are made within particular contexts, in response to specific problems which arise there and then. Further, these contexts provide the limited number of solutions which are open and available to them at any given point. If one is to appreciate this dialectic between context and decision, he must first of all know what the context is.

B. To help students clarify their values and to make responsible moral judgments.--The phrase, "to clarify values," stands in need of its own clarification. This phrase implies at least two sorts of operations.

1. On the first level, "to clarify values" means to define the terms used in discussions of value. In particular, the values themselves require definition. Take, for instance, the concept of "love." A few questions will call to mind the ambiguities surrounding this term. Is God's love of man the same as man's love of God? Does love of neighbor have the same quality in each of the following cases: love of one's spouse; love of one's child; love of a friend; love of an enemy? What is that type of love called eros? The definitions given by Plato and Freud, for example, are overlapping but not identical.

I want to insist that the definition of value terms is no gut-less, "academic" exercise. Ideas have consequences. The actions which effectuate our decisions to act lovingly, for instance, vary with our understandings of what love is. What appears to be irresponsible behavior may be the product of narrow or ill-conceived notions.

2. On the second level, "to clarify values" means to apply to specific situations general principles of value. It is all very well to say, "Love your neighbor," but that command (exhortation?), standing by itself, is remarkably empty. The phrase takes on substance only within specific contexts in which particular individuals have to confront their own problems and to resolve those problems for themselves. Let's take an example. I have received a notice from my draft board: "Greetings" What shall I do? Is it more loving to

²As I emphasized in my first paper, this is a history of ideas course. Historians concern themselves not only with description but also with explanation (PNP 77:1/12, 13).

³Please note that I do not forego the possibility of an "objective" truth or a universal moral order.

⁴PNP 77:1/2.

refuse induction into the army, thus avoiding the possibility that I might have to shoot a "neighbor," or to report for military service, thus helping, perhaps, to prevent the invasion of my country, an invasion in which my "neighbor" runs the risk of being killed? Does the date on my draft notice make any difference? Is 1942, the war against Hitler, different from 1950, the Korean War, or 1969, the war in Indo-China?

In everyday life, this process of "gearing down" from the general to the particular is notoriously difficult. With practice, however, the process can become more manageable. One can learn (a) to appreciate the types and range of factors which bear upon particular moments of decision (Here, of course, we return to the concept of historical "texture"); (b) to define exactly the particular problems which call for resolution; (c) to identify the potential solutions to these problems, given the context at hand; and (d) to weigh the arguments for and against each of these alternatives. To facilitate this kind of learning is one of the purposes of Baker's history of ideas course, as I see it.

I argue that the recorded experience of past generations can help us as we strive to learn how general principles can be applied to specific circumstances. This is so because the experience of the past, while it is different from ours in certain respects, is like our own in others.⁵ Take the matter of problems. Certain problems are perennials. For instance, how are we to reconcile the claims of authority (whether a parent, schoolmaster, boss, commanding officer or policeman) and the preferences of the individual? Or take the factors which bear upon the kinds of choices which we can make. Let us say that "freedom" is a value which we prize. We are obliged to note that, factor one, all human beings take a long time to mature and factor two, the growing child depends upon his parents and other adults. What does the fact of dependence mean insofar as the freedom of a father is concerned? The freedom of a mother? Since these similarities do exist, we may conclude that (a) given a problem in common, the solutions devised by earlier generations can help us to decide upon our own solutions; and (b) given the common sets of factors bearing upon particular problems, the analysis of those factors in the past can help us as we conduct our own evaluation of them.

II. Content of the Course

Organizing this course is an exercise in the reconciliation of contraries. The class time which we have at our disposal consists of four hours a week (at the most) during two semesters of sixteen weeks apiece. We intend to consider elements of Western civilization from Homer and Abraham to the present.⁶ We want to convey to students reasonably accurate information. This means that one must be chary of broad generalizations. As one becomes more specific, however, he is obliged to consume more time. Further, we want to help students learn to solve problems and to make judgments concerning them.⁷ This kind of

⁵PNP 77:1/16.

⁶PNP 77:1/4.

⁷PNP 77:1/9.

learning is a protracted process as well. In order to do all of these things in the time allotted, we must make a series of trade-offs. Inevitably these compromises will not give everyone, including myself, everything that they want, but they will give practically everybody something.

All of this prepares me to say that we must pass a "self-denying ordinance," and limit severely the subject matter of this course. I intend to do this by employing what has been called, rather inelegantly, the "post hole technique." This is the very opposite of surveying the history of Western Civilization, century by century, although it does go along in chronological order from early to late. I expect to consider a short list of ideas only. These ideas are examined as they developed within a limited geographical area over a relatively short period of time. Having discussed the ideas in this particular context, one skips over the intervening space and years in order to pass in review the next area and period.

Comments concerning each of the categories mentioned above, (a) the short list of ideas; (b) limited geographical areas; and (c) short periods of time, follow.

A. Ideas.--In the paper which established the foundations underlying this course, it was laid down that the "history of ideas" means, for the present purposes, the history of discrete concepts.⁸ Given the time at our disposal, we can examine but a few of these ideas. Criteria are needed in terms of which we can decide what to bring in and what to leave out.

Here let me make explicit a point which the second purpose stated above has implied already.⁹ We can make a rough distinction between ideas of "fact" ("nature," time, theories of change, etc.) and ideas of "value" (justice, cooperation, beauty, etc.). I intend to focus upon the latter.

The criteria for the inclusion of a particular idea are these:

1. The value, however defined, has been widely regarded as such throughout the history of Western civilization and is so regarded today. This criterion depends upon the argument that we can learn from past experience and reflects a desire to consider issues of perennial importance.

2. The value in question is one which has many ramifications.¹⁰ Such a value, in its concrete forms, will be operating in diverse contexts. This is a help in trying to understand the inter-relationships between the ideas of individuals and the social and natural environments in which they live.¹¹

⁸PNP 77:1/6.

⁹See above, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰Consider, for instance, the value of "freedom": determinism and free will, civil liberties, woman's liberation, academic freedom, etc.

¹¹PNP 77:1/14.

Furthermore, the wide range of cases to which the value refers provides an extra measure of flexibility insofar as planning and teaching the course are concerned.

3. The value under consideration has generated a large quantity of material from which reading assignments can be drawn. I would look for values which the disciplines of philosophy, social and political theory, literature and religion, among other fields, have discussed repeatedly.

4. The value is one which presumably is of interest to students.

In my judgment, the following ideas satisfy these criteria. They are the ideas upon which the course will focus.

1. love;
2. freedom;
3. peace.

B. Geographical Areas.-- I propose that we concentrate our attention upon urban places, cities. There are two reasons for this.

1. More often than not, the "artifacts" of culture, whether they be books, paintings, musical scores or what not, are created by individuals who are living in a town or city and participating in the social (and perhaps also the political) life of the place. This association is embedded in various terms which we commonly use. "Civilization" is derived from the Latin civis, "citizen" (in ancient Rome, of course, citizen of a "city-state") and civitas, "the citizens united in a political community." An "urbane" or cultivated person is a resident of an urbs, "city," as over against a "barbarian," one who lives beyond the city limits. The connection between culture and the city holds true even if certain creative people, either willingly or unwillingly, have lived in the countryside. Even those who are anti-urban cannot be understood apart from the cities against which they are reacting.

2. As I noted in my first paper, the greater part of Baker students have come from and will proceed to cities and towns.¹² If we attend to cities as environments in which moral decisions are to be made, presumably we are relating this course to the situations in which students will find themselves.

Criteria for the selection of appropriate cities are these:

1. The cities, taken together, represent the geographical range of Western civilization. It is appropriate, therefore, to include cities located in the Mediterranean basin, the European heartland and America.

2. A considerable number of creative persons, who have spoken to the ideas listed above, are associated with the city.

3. Enough evidence survives to establish the historical context in which these persons worked.

¹²PNP 77:1/6.

4. At least some members of the staff are acquainted with the history and culture of the city and are in a position, therefore, to help those who are less well prepared.

A statement concerning cities which meet these criteria appears below, following a paragraph on the choice of time periods.

C. Periods.--As stated above, I intend to consider in some detail a relatively short period of time and then, skipping over the intervening years, to examine another short period, and so forth. Criteria for the selection of appropriate periods are these:

1. The periods, taken together extend across the whole of Western civilization, ancient, medieval and modern.
2. A large number of creative persons live in a given city during the period in question. These persons discuss the ideas previously noted.
3. There is evidence for the history of the city during this period.
4. Some staff members, at least, are familiar with this segment of the city's past.

We turn now to specifics.

Three cities and eras will be considered during the first semester. They are:

1. Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries BC.--This period sees the rise and fall of Athenian democracy. It includes the careers of great philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle; great playwrights, such as Sophocles and Aristophanes; and great historians, such as Thucydides.
2. Rome during the first century BC and the first century AD. During this period the Republic is transformed into an Empire. The "Roman peace" is re-established. A new religion, Christianity, is brought to the city. Lucretius, Cicero, Ovid, Paul of Tarsus and Epictetus are active.
3. Paris during the twelfth and thirteenth century.--A new kind of educational institution, the "university," is invented during the twelfth century. The University of Paris is the center of philosophical and theological learning during the High Middle Ages. Both the leading Dominican intellectual, Thomas Aquinas, and the leading Franciscan, Bonaventure, are associated with this studium.

The cities and periods to be examined during the second semester are these:

1. London, circa 1660 to circa 1740 (from the restoration of Charles II to the resignation of Sir Robert Walpole).--London during this period is a center of the "new" physical science (Royal Society founded; Newton, Principia Mathematica). Locke is a key figure, producing highly influential works in epistemology and political theory, and important books on theology and education. William Penn publishes his Essay Towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe.
2. Paris, circa 1870 to circa 1918 (from the Franco-Prussian War to the end of World War I).--I put forward Paris during this period with some hesitation, because I am not well acquainted with 19th and 20th century French literature.

I look to the reader for advice. Will we find reading material on the themes of this course, written during this period, which our students can handle? Perhaps it would be useful to narrow the span of years covered; I ask for advice concerning this point as well. W. Warren Wager, for instance, distinguishes between a first and a second "post-Darwinian generation." He dates the first of these from 1870 to c. 1895 and the second from c. 1895 to 1918. The second was composed of "neo-romantics" concerned with vitalism and the inner life. He cites the names of Verlaine, Mallarme, Rimbaud, Huysmans, Barres, Proust and the early Gide as instances of the latter category.¹³

3. New York during the twentieth century.--At some point toward the close of the nineteenth century, New York displaces Boston as the "cultural capital" of the United States. With the flow of financial capital from foreign parts to these shores, and the establishment of the United Nations Organization, New York becomes a kind of international capital as well. This position justifies its place in the course. Perhaps the interval of time to be studied should be shorter. I ask for your advice concerning this matter. We could easily focus, for instance, upon the decade of the 1930's, during which a number of prominent personalities, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Hannah Arndt and Erich Fromm, came to New York.

III. Procedural Matters

Certain practical concerns, which bear upon the organization of the course, are described in this section. They include the times and places of meeting, the content of lectures and the criteria for selecting reading assignments.

A. Times and places of meeting.--I have recommended to the Deans and Registrar that this course be scheduled to meet three times a week, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, for fifty minutes per meeting, and once on Thursday, from eleven to twelve o'clock.¹⁴ Comments concerning the use of these periods follow.

For a number of years, inter-disciplinary general education courses have included both large lecture sessions and smaller discussion groups. I intend to retain this pattern, at least for the present. Well-organized lectures can convey information in an efficient manner and provide common ground for all the members of the course. Small groups serve a variety of purposes: They facilitate personal contacts between students and teachers; they are useful settings for the exchange of ideas; and they are convenient means whereby the students' progress can be monitored.

I expect that so far as the MWF periods are concerned, the ratio of lecture sessions to discussion meetings will be approximately 1:2. The exact number

¹³The quoted phrases are those of Wager, European Intellectual History Since Darwin and Marx (Harper Torchbooks; New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 6, 7.

¹⁴This Thursday meeting is the "fourth hour" to which my first paper refers (PNP 77:1/1).

of lectures, as well as their distribution throughout the course, remain to be decided. There is no reason why Monday should inevitably be a lecture day and Wednesday and Friday should always be discussion days. The Director and staff may determine that two or more lectures in a row, or two or more discussions in a row, would better serve the interests of the course.

Finding an appropriate lecture hall for the 220 students expected in the history of ideas is a problem for which there is no completely satisfactory solution. Rice is far and away too large; the Audio-Visual Room in Musical Arts is unhappily too small. If we hold lectures in the latter room, we must divide the students and schedule three lecture sections. I consider this a small price to pay in order to escape the inconveniences of Rice Auditorium. The students will have desks upon which to write; lecturers will be able to maintain eye contact with their audience; and the audio-visual facilities hold the promise of being more satisfactory. A series of classrooms across campus will be set aside for the same hours that the A-V Room is reserved. Since there are three lecture sections and ten discussion sections, four classrooms will be secured for one period, and three apiece for the other two. A student will always meet three times a week at the same hour, whether in the A-V Room or in a discussion group.

Now we come to the fourth hour on Thursday (or whenever). During this period, all of the students in the course, regardless of their lecture and discussion sections, will meet in Rice Auditorium. I do not expect to make use of this hour every week, but we need to have it available for purposes such as these:

1. Musical or dramatic performances for which the A-V Room is inappropriate;¹⁵
2. Lectures by speakers visiting the Baker campus; and
3. Movies unaccompanied by a lecturer's commentary.

It should not be necessary to schedule any meetings for the evening hours.

B. Content of lectures.--I refer now to the lectures to be given in the A-V Room during the MWF slots. I anticipate that additional audio-visual equipment will be in place before the 1977-78 school year begins and that the course budget will contain a generous appropriation for audio-visual materials. Under these circumstances, we can expect heavy use of slides and recordings, for instance, during these lectures.¹⁶

The lectures will serve one or more of the following functions:

1. To introduce the ideas which are to be considered. I take this is a broad, not a narrow, sense. If we need to point out to students what they should look for as they read, this can be done through a syllabus or lists of discussion questions.

¹⁵PNP 77:1/9.

¹⁶Since the preparation of slide lectures is a time-consuming process, during the first year of the course not every lecture may be illustrated as thoroughly as one might like. An educational media specialist could provide invaluable help in preparing these lectures.

2. To describe the historical contexts in which these ideas were generated. Hopefully, audio-visual aids can help students to get a "feel" for the cities in question and for the people who lived in them.

3. To integrate the various concerns of the course. For instance, a lecture on "Women in Fifth Century Athens" would involve a certain amount of historical background and cut across two ideas, love and freedom.

C. Assignments.--The assignments which students are expected to read remain to be determined by the Director and the staff. The following statements can serve as guidelines for the selection process:

1. Assignments may be taken from either primary or secondary sources.
2. They may consist of entire works or of excerpts therefrom.
3. Overall, they should represent a variety of disciplines including, among others, history, literature, philosophy, religion and social and political theory.
4. A considerable proportion of the assignments should come from the works of authors who were living in the cities mentioned above during the periods which we are examining.
5. A single assignment may include both "ancient" and "contemporary" material. For instance, let us say that under the rubric of "freedom" we are discussing the individual's relation to the State. One might read part of Sophocles' "Antigone" and, in order to bring the issue closer home, Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail."
6. The rule of "equal time" need not be followed. Some issues growing out of the ideas under review will be more important during some periods than others.

I would like to consider the possibility of creating our own book of readings. In the short run, such a book would supplement the texts which students are asked to buy. A book of this sort can be manufactured by Baker's Duplicating Office. In the longer run, an extensive book which reflects several years' experience with the course might be published by a commercial firm. Whether or not a supplementary volume can be produced by September, 1977 is very much a matter of time, time to select the readings, time to secure publisher's permissions (if necessary), time to prepare the copy and time to run, collate and bind the sheets. If these things cannot be done before the fall arrives, perhaps a few short assignments can be distributed in the form of handouts.

Conclusion

This paper has established the purposes of the history of ideas course, to help students become aware of the "texture" of history and to help them clarify their values and to make responsible moral judgments. The ideas to be considered, love, freedom and peace, have been specified. The course will be focused upon relatively short periods in the history of selected cities. Guidelines for lectures and reading assignments have been drawn. Specific topics and readings will be listed in the next paper.

Addendum

On pages six and seven of this paper, the cities and time periods to be covered during the second semester are listed as London, circa 1660 to circa 1740; Paris, circa 1870 to circa 1918; and New York during the twentieth century. After this paper was completed, it was decided to change this list so that it would read Paris during the eighteenth century; London during the nineteenth century; and New York during the first half of the twentieth century. This change was made once the members of the staff had been identified and the available texts had been reviewed.